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The Mystery of Prester John

David of Tao and the Two Johns
The Georgian Hypothesis



REVISED ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED EDITION

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PhD

The Mystery of Prester John

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The three figures on the cover are a modern artistic interpretation created for this edition; their faces are imagined. See the illustration credits.

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Illustrations

The book presents reproductions of surviving miniatures, a relief and wall paintings, historical maps, the title page of a printed book, photographs of monasteries, and modern reconstructions. The captions give their dates, sources and conditions of use. The reconstructions suggest possible appearances; the map represents the author's territorial hypothesis, while the chronological diagram compares the dates of events and evidence. A photographic facsimile of the Greek colophon of 1047 has been added, with an explanation of the edition's reading and the photograph's limitations.

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Illustration 1

Territorial Hypothesis for the Kingdom of the Georgians



An illustrated map of the historical setting around 979. Compiled by Giorgi Kavtaradze on the basis of a critical analysis of historical sources. The coastline is based on modern data; mountain and church symbols are schematic.

Author's territorial outline · Natural Earth coastlines.
Full source and licence: Illustration credits.

From the Author

Accounts of Prester John have a curious feature: the more they multiply, the harder it becomes to see the past from which the story might have emerged. Each new author adds something. The king-priest changes his country, his enemies and his ancestry, while the early tradition disappears behind later stories. My research has therefore taken the opposite direction: from the familiar legend, I have turned back to its possible historical origins.

My starting observation is this: Otto of Freising's account already relates a legendary story. The year 1145 cannot be regarded as the date of that story's birth. Otto writes of a king-priest who is already called Prester John. His account must therefore have been preceded by a tradition whose past is unknown to us. How far back that tradition reached cannot be determined from Otto's words alone. It is the answer to this question that I seek.¹

My hypothesis is that we should seek the historical basis of the legend in the joint actions of David III of Tao, John Tornike and John the Iberian. These three men were connected by real relationships. During a grave crisis in Byzantium in 979, David sent military assistance, Tornike led the army, and the memory of their cooperation was preserved by the monastic community headed by John the Iberian. Within this circle, several features relevant to the story of the king-priest come together: a ruler's power, the name John, religious authority and military victory.²

I believe this convergence deserves a historical explanation. Qualities distributed among three individuals could have merged into a single figure in a distant tradition. Other victories and other countries would subsequently have become associated with that figure. Behind the legend of the king-priest, then, there may lie the transformed memory of people who were connected with one another. In this book, I investigate that possibility and set out the evidence on which it rests.

In my documentary research, I have already identified real people whose names are accompanied by the title presbyter. This material changes the starting point of the inquiry: we can first study particular individuals and their surroundings, and then ask how the memory of any one of them might have become connected with the legend. At the same time, the acts examined do not yet give us grounds for directly identifying either John the Iberian or John Tornike as a presbyter. We cannot add one John's title to another John's biography.³

I therefore begin the narrative with the Johns of the documentary record. I then examine the cooperation between David and the two Johns, the victory of 979, and the eastern connections of the defeated Skleros. My aim is to formulate an argument for a Georgian basis that readers can test against the sources. Similarities to Otto's account, differences from it, and the route of transmission that remains to be reconstructed are equally necessary parts of this argument.

The Story Heard at Viterbo

In 1145, the West was alarmed by the fall of Edessa. At the end of the previous year, Zengi's forces had captured this important crusader city. The search for assistance was accompanied by discussion of the reasons for the defeat. At this time, a bishop arriving from the Syrian coast brought news to the papal court of a victory won in a distant country.

At Viterbo, Hugh of Jabala met Otto, bishop of Freising. According to Hugh's account, beyond Persia and Armenia lived a John who was both king and priest. He had defeated powerful rulers of the East and intended to set out to help Jerusalem, but had been unable to cross the Tigris. In this story, political hope merged with a vague knowledge of a distant country and the unusual figure of a Christian ruler.⁴

In Otto's chronicle, this John has a kingdom, a faith, an illustrious ancestry and a precious sceptre. Readers encounter him under a name that is already known: "that is what they call him", the chronicler explains. Yet we do not know from whom Hugh heard the story, how many people passed it from one to another, or in what languages it was told. Otto does not pursue these questions.

We can follow Otto's account forwards through time. That route leads to the Mongol court and the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. To pose my own question, however, we must first turn back to the events that drew a Georgian ruler and two monks into a Byzantine political crisis.

In 979, the Byzantine government was fighting a rebellious commander. David of Tao sent an army to its aid, led by the monk John Tornike. A second John also appears in the Athonite history of this mission: the Iberian, father of Euthymios, a former nobleman and monastic superior. Returning from victory, Tornike entrusted the wealth he had acquired to him. Their cooperation continued after the war was over.^{5, 6}

The events of 979 and the meeting at Viterbo are separated by 166 years. Throughout that period, books were being written, documents preserved and founders commemorated at Iviron. This setting helps us understand how their story could have survived. The next question is more difficult: could that memory have travelled beyond Athos and changed in such a way that a single king-priest emerged in place of the two Johns and David? The search for an answer begins with a document: where do the name John and the title presbyter appear, to whom does the entry refer, and what does it offer towards reconstructing the historical setting?

Chapter 1

Johns Called Presbyter in Documentary Sources

Before seeking the legendary king-priest, we must meet the real Johns. They sign documents, copy books, lead a monastery or witness a legal transaction. The combination of their name and title is part of a particular record, rather than the description of a character in a narrative. This distinction is fundamental to the investigation.

The selected corpus brings together eight dossiers covering the years 954–1066. In some cases, a photographic facsimile has been compared with the edition; in others, the reading of a signature is available only through a quotation from the critical edition. Eight dossiers do not amount to a register of all Johns, nor do they necessarily represent eight different people. Further identifying features are needed before we can discern an individual biography behind a brief entry.

What the Documentary Inquiry Has Established

In the Athonite typikon of 972, a John is identified by the titles monk and presbyter. In the Lavra act of 991, these titles are associated with John, abbot of Xerokastron. Another John, connected with documents of 1012, is a disciple of Euthymios the Iberian and a copyist. Here a particular monastic setting comes into view, although the attested disciple is not John the Iberian, the founder of Iviron.⁷

Dossier and date	Person or role	Verification of the text
J01 · 954	John the copyist	Photograph + edition; colophon restored at a later date
J02 · 972	Signatory of the Tragos	Quotation from the critical edition
J03 · 985–998	Abbot of Xerokastron	Presbyter in the formula of 991

Dossier and date	Person or role	Verification of the text
J04 · 1010	Witness at Ierissos	Quotation from the critical edition
J05 · 1012	Disciple of Euthymios and copyist	Quotation from the critical edition
J06 · 1015 / 1020	John the Grammarian	Photograph of the item dated 1015; title in the 1020 act
J07 · 1047	Copyist of the Lavra manuscript	Photograph + edition
J08 · 1066	Copyist of Paris gr. 289	Photograph + edition

This material confirms that “John the presbyter” combines a real name with an ecclesiastical title. Its documentary use and the origin of the legendary king-priest's name are, however, separate questions. Evidence that a person existed cannot in itself become evidence that he was transformed into a legend. The numerous attestations have broadened the inquiry while also showing why this designation alone cannot be treated as a unique identifying feature.

How We Move from a Name to a Person

An individual's identification must be supported by name, title, date, place and relationships taken together. The name of a monastery, a teacher, a relative or a fellow witness is especially important. If two entries share only a name among these features, it is still premature to combine them. If several independent features coincide, there is a specific basis on which to test a biographical connection.

We must apply precisely this rule to the act of 985. John, abbot of Xerokastron, is identified by the name of his monastery; the title presbyter is absent from this formula. Neither the function of the entry nor the later attestations support identifying him as Tornike. In the act of 984, too, we must distinguish John the Iberian, the recipient, from another John, the writer of the text.⁸

Being a monk, an abbot and a presbyter are not interchangeable concepts. One person may be both a monk and a priest, but the attestation of one status does not automatically establish the other. I therefore look for the religious status required by my hypothesis in the sources concerning the very person whose military or political actions I am studying.

The Date of an Event and the Age of a Manuscript

The date of a colophon also requires care. The Paris colophon recording an event of 954 was restored at a later date; the date transmitted in its text and the age of the surviving hand therefore do not coincide. We also have a published photograph of the Lavra colophon of 1047, although the edition supplies the full reading of its worn section. These circumstances do not negate the source's value; they show us exactly what we are relying on.⁹

The Setting of the Designation and the Historical Trio

The corpus of documentary Johns shows us a setting in which this designation formed part of ordinary ecclesiastical language. The history of David and the two Johns answers a different question: where do we find a ruler, a monk who commanded an army, a monastic superior and an important victory connected with one another? The first inquiry concerns a possible designation; the second, connected actions. Bringing the two together requires evidence linking a particular person or tradition to both.

To test the Georgian hypothesis, we have different kinds of evidence: manuscript colophons, monastic acts, inscriptions, and historical or hagiographical works. Through these, we establish the relationship between David and the two Johns. Each source reveals a different aspect of that relationship.

A colophon may preserve the names of the person who commissioned a book and the copyist. An act defines property and rights. An inscription commemorates a particular person and his contribution, while a hagiographer interprets the spiritual meaning of a life. When evidence created for different purposes attests the same connection, we gain a clearer view of that connection's historical basis.^{10, 11, 12}

The Georgian Narrative in the Eleventh Century

George the Athonite's *Life of John and Euthymios* is usually dated to 1042–1044. Its oldest surviving copy, A-558, was transcribed at Ivron in 1074. The shared story of David and the two Johns thus already existed in writing before Otto's account. It is not a biographical scheme assembled by a modern researcher from scattered names.¹³

The manuscript of 1074 attests the existence of this narrative and one particular instance of its circulation. It cannot tell us who read the text in Antioch or heard its contents in another language. The early written form of the Georgian story and its possible transmission to the West are, accordingly, two different questions.

George the Athonite looks to his community's past for exemplary leadership. In the text, the founders' achievements are also set against the monastery's subsequent condition. Episodes of humility, obedience and divine assistance form part of this authorial purpose. Taking them into account helps us understand the historical information more fully: the hagiographical form itself shows how the community preserved and interpreted its past.¹⁴

Different People with the Same Name

We know several figures by the name John: John the Iberian, John Tornike, John Varazvache and the later priest John. The information about each must be connected with his date, activity and title. A shared name provides no basis for merging their biographies.^{15, 16}

The dating of the Georgian and Greek narratives must also be considered. The existence of a later Greek *Life* cannot establish that the same text was being read in Otto's time. An earlier Greek oral tradition is possible, but its existence requires separate evidence.¹⁷

The narrative that follows seeks the point at which these two lines of inquiry meet. I first examine the political crisis that brought David's military strength together with the experience of an Athonite monk. I then return to the question of what might have remained of this cooperation in a distant tradition.

Chapter 2

An Empire Threatened by Its Own Army

In January 976, Emperor John Tzimiskes died. Basil II and Constantine VIII were already crowned co-emperors, although experienced palace officials exercised considerable influence over the government of the state. At this point, Basil was not yet the powerful sovereign we know from his later victories. The young emperor held the throne, but the consolidation of his own authority still lay ahead.¹⁸

Outside the palace, the eastern military aristocracy was growing stronger. The great families were linked by kinship, estates, comrades in arms and experience of command. The empire's expansion increased their influence as well. A successful commander's power was useful to the government, but became a threat when the commander himself began to aspire to the throne.

The rebellion of Bardas Skleros was connected with this confrontation. Behind him stood the interests of various groups. Their positions, income and security depended on which side they chose. The war also confronted cities and soldiers with a choice: whose orders should they obey, and to whom should they pledge the loyalty on which their future would depend?

Constantinople sent Bardas Phokas against Skleros. Phokas belonged to the same military aristocracy and had himself rebelled before. Entrusting him with command revealed the palace's limited options: to defeat one influential family, it had become necessary to enlist the help of another.

Roads, Land and the Daily Realities of War

The outcome of the war was not determined by commanders' decisions alone. An army needed provisions, its horses needed fodder, the wounded needed care, and its lines of movement needed protection. Rivers, mountain passes and settlements from which supplies could be obtained constrained military operations. These conditions help us understand the military story, although reconstructing a particular route requires evidence from the sources and historical geography.

In the eastern empire, Armenian, Georgian and Syriac Christian traditions existed alongside the Greek-speaking culture of the state. Ecclesiastical differences did not always determine political alignments. Alliances also crossed linguistic and confessional boundaries. We must keep this setting in mind when comparing the story of the civil war with the Christian king and his enemies in the later legend.

Tao participated in these relationships. David possessed military strength and political influence, making his support important to Constantinople. The request for assistance reveals the position of both parties: the empire needed an ally, while the crisis gave David an opportunity to intervene in imperial politics.¹⁹

The involvement of the Athonite monks in this undertaking also becomes understandable if we consider their past. Some of them had entered the monastery from aristocratic circles. Taking monastic vows changed the purpose of their lives, but their family ties, old acquaintances and relationships of trust endured. The mission to obtain assistance drew upon these connections. Let us first become acquainted with David, and then with the two Johns who connected him to the Athonite community.

Illustration 2

Miniature of Basil II



Psalter of Basil II, eleventh century. Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, gr. Z. 17 (coll. 421), fol. IIIr. The emperor is depicted under the protection of Christ and angels. The miniature presents a later imperial image and does not directly record Basil's appearance in 979. For a modern reconstruction based on it, see Figure 3.

Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana · gr. Z. 17, fol. IIIr · Public domain.
Full source and licence: Illustration credits.

Illustration 3

Modern Reconstruction of Basil II



An interpretation created with artificial intelligence assistance, based on the miniature in the eleventh-century Psalter. The pose, crown and military dress follow the source; the face, textures of the materials and setting are conjectural. This is not an exact reconstruction of his appearance in 979. For the source, see Figure 2.

Modern reconstruction · Based on Marciana, gr. Z. 17, fol. IIIr.
Full source and licence: Illustration credits.